

USING MUSIC AS A PRIMARY SOURCE IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

By

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## Introduction and Overview

Art can act as a mirror by reflecting the ideals of a society. In other words, the ideas and concepts of a particular time period manifest themselves in the corresponding worlds of art, literature, and music. For example, it is probably not a coincidence that Renaissance artists began using architecture in their paintings to develop the technique of perspective in their works, at the same time that the growth of cities and urbanization occurred in the Italian city-states of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

As a public high school social studies teacher at the New York City Museum School I live and teach by this concept. Indeed, this is a central tenet in the philosophy of the Museum School where middle and high school students spend two afternoons a week in museums understanding the correlation between art and society.

In my world history class, my colleague Avram Kline and I take the tenth grade students to various museums throughout the city two afternoons a week to examine and study various exhibits and objects that coincide with teaching the state mandated curriculum for tenth grade social studies. When studying the Italian Renaissance, the students spend significant time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art Renaissance Gallery to see how the historical concepts manifest themselves in the artwork of that period. The painting provide a window on how Renaissance artists portrayed their changing world by incorporating the secular with the sacred. An example of how artists expressed this combination of the sacred world with the secular one occurs in Quentin Massys' *The Money and His Wife*. Here the principle character in the painting, the wife, has the Bible open trying to read it but her attention diverts as she gazes directly at her husband's counting of the money. The painting offers social commentary on the rapidly changing world of the Renaissance.

This philosophy of using art in teaching history can also be applied to the music of that time period. Just as Renaissance painting reflected concepts of this rebirth of a Golden Age, Renaissance music is capable of conveying similar ideas. For instance, the music of Renaissance composer Guillaume Dufay has value as a primary source in studying history in the same manner as the painted works of Leonardo Da Vinci.

This thesis project explores the use of music in helping explain and understand history for a high school social studies classroom. In the New York State Social Studies Resource Guide, with each unit, there is a section devoted to suggested documents where educators can refer to primary sources in hopes to enhance their lessons. For the unit on the Renaissance, the guide suggests using documents such as Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Dante's *Inferno*. In addition, the Renaissance art of Da Vinci and Michelangelo are also suggested (Resource Guide page 102). If educators are encouraging teachers to use such primary sources as speeches, poems, diary entries, and even paintings, why can't music be considered as well? Why for example, doesn't the Resource Guide recommend using the secular chansons of Dufay?

By incorporating standard curriculum lesson plans that include an aim, motivation, and protocol (see Part Two, "Lesson Operating Protocol"), I hope to illustrate the value music can play in the humanities classroom. The paper is divided into three sections: part one is the overview and philosophical foundations, part two contains the lessons plans for educators with instruction, and part three is the reflection and student responses to these lessons.

#### Philosophical Foundation - Multiple Intelligences

The Museum School is committed to having a heterogeneous population where the students of various abilities are placed in the same classroom. In other words, they are not tracked according to ability where the stronger students are in a separate "gifted" class. As

students are learning at different rates, this makes it challenging for me as their teacher to ensure that everyone is learning the material. One major way to combat the challenges of teaching heterogeneous groupings of students is to adhere to the philosophy of Multiple Intelligences by Howard Gardner (Gardener page 17).

Gardner breaks down the traditional concept of intelligence measured by IQ tests by suggesting that everyone possesses seven different types of intelligences with strengths and weaknesses in each. The seven intelligences Gardner outlines are: musical, bodily-kinesthetic, logical mathematical, linguistic, spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. They are not mutually exclusive of one another, but rather overlap. For instance, musical intelligence is often linked to mathematical and spatial intelligence.

By adhering to the philosophy of Gardner and multiple intelligences, teachers can now look at assessment in a different light. In the following quote, Gardner criticizes the standard test method of assessment and argues that learning and assessment must occur in a broad range of activities that allow students to draw from different strengths.

Assessment, then becomes a central feature of an educational system. We believe that it is essential to depart from standardized testing. We also believe that standard pencil and paper short-answer tests sample only a small proportion of intellectual abilities and often reward a kind of decontextualized facility. The means of assessment we favor should ultimately search for genuine problem-solving or product-fashion skills in individuals *across a wide range of materials* (emphasis added) (Gardner page 31).

Gardner's idea of teaching and assessing students through a broad spectrum of avenues is the foundation of my own personal pedagogical philosophy and the basis for this thesis. Referring back to my unit on the Renaissance, the students for example read patron letters where

wealthy patrons commission artists such as Leonardo Da Vinci to paint them pictures. The class then goes to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to look for patron shields in some of the paintings that signified which family paid for that particular painting. They also examine paintings where the patron is painted right into the scene. To assess the learning, students are then required to write their modern day patron letter commissioning an artist to create something for them. To set this example in the context of Gardner's model of multiple intelligences, the concept of a patron system in Renaissance Italy is the concept I want the students to understand. For some students who have strong linguistic intelligence, they may identify with the written patron letters and learn the concept better that way. For students who have a stronger sense of spatial intelligence, they may understand the patron system when studying the paintings and seeing the patron shield prominently displayed or the face of the actual patron depicted in the painting.

To be sure, this example is somewhat simplistic, for it is not a black and white issue where students can only connect with the material through only one of the intelligences. Rather, the intelligences work more organically to compliment each other in an effort to reinforce the idea or concept being taught. In other words, by demonstrating the patron system through different media, students will connect with the subject matter and retain the information better.

#### The Practical Application of Multiple Intelligences - Music Intelligence

I first began using music as a primary source in my social studies classroom almost by accident. It was my first year of teaching, and I was scrambling for lessons and ideas for my Global History class everyday in the same manner that all first year teachers do. Early in the year, I started a unit on the Renaissance and wanted the students to understand how the Renaissance represented a break from the Middle Ages. The Social Studies Resource Guide (the New York State guide of mandated standards for Global History) states that: "students should

understand that the Renaissance represented a shift from the emphasis on spiritual concerns in the medieval period to more secular ones"(Resource Guide page 101). The guide also states that students need know the rise of humanism and individualism prevalent in the Renaissance.

For this particular unit, I had the students compare a typical medieval painting of the Madonna and Child with Raphael's *School of Athens*. The latter painting shows perspective, artistic detail, and humanism, the influence of Classical Greek ideas. The students also found out that Raphael painted the faces of Michelangelo, Da Vinci, and himself as the subjects Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates. The idea that artists not only signed their work, but painted themselves in their paintings, was a drastic change from many of the anonymous painting of the Middle Ages. Art was no longer something simply for God and the Church, as fame and celebrity began to cultivate in Italy during the Renaissance. This artistic change also highlights the renewed emphasis in individualism during the Renaissance.

It occurred to me that many of the contrasts between the two historical periods could also be conveyed through the medium of music (I have included this lesson in Part Two of this paper). Music is a medium that nearly all students identify with. I remember beginning Lesson One - *The Renaissance as a period of Rebirth* (see page 10) by discussing what the music of today tells us about our society. The students responded enthusiastically by saying that rap music can sometimes reveal life for urban kids of color, and similar comments. I then transitioned into playing the plainchant, asking the students to consider what this music reveals about the society from which it came.

It is important to stress that these musical selections and art pieces are all launching points for deeper inquiry. For example, no Renaissance composition is going to give students a complete picture of humanism or the new emphasis on individualism that occurred after the

Middle Ages. In all cases, the music serves as a compliment to a primary or secondary source reading. For instance, in studying humanism, after showing a Renaissance painting by Raphael, I include a reading by Petrarch (known as the father of humanism during the Italian Renaissance when he assembled a library of Greek and Roman works).

In addition, the students in my school for the most part do not possess any general background of music. Only a handful can read music, so very little music theory is discussed with these works. The high school students at my school have no music classes (because of the extensive museum traveling) and the middle school has music twice a week. This can be limiting, and I struggle with the development of the lesson plans. The selection is discussed in a purely historical context. There are lessons that do try and go beyond this context by introducing some very basic fundamentals of music theory (see Lesson Two - *Santiago Compostella as the Birth Place of Polyphony*). Hopefully this project can be a way to show the value of music education in a non-music setting and that the arts can work in tandem with dominant discourse.

One final note on the methodology of this practice. I have organized the remaining part of this thesis in two more parts. Part Two is the actual lesson plans complete with a well-defined aim. The aim is standard curriculum practice for New York State, and most schools require that the aim be written on the board for every lesson. Following the aim are the learning objectives for that particular lesson. The lessons also come with a historical background on the composers of composition, with the assumption that the teacher using this guide has very little prior knowledge. Part Three is a reflection on the effectiveness of the lesson with various student reaction and assessment.

# Part Two - Lesson Plans

## Lesson Operating Procedure

The lesson plans that follow are modeled after the standard New York State Board of Education procedure. The lesson has a **title** that is the focus of the lesson, followed by an **aim**, or guiding question that the lesson intends to answer. Many schools require that the **aim** be written conspicuously on the black board at the start of each lesson. The **aim** is followed by the specific learning **objectives** that the lesson intends to convey. These **objectives** are related to the aim, but often go beyond the guiding question by incorporating other concepts or ideas. The **historical background** is a brief summary of the composition(s) involved and the context of the composers and or selection.

The lesson activities also begin with a **motivation**: a method of initially engaging students into the lesson. It could be a short discussion of a reading to get students on task. The Following the **motivation** is the **application** where the activities of the lesson are carried out. Some **activities** refer to handouts that immediately come after each lesson. To conclude the lesson, I have included methods of assessment under **evaluation**.

## Lesson #1 - The Renaissance as a period of Rebirth -

### Lesson Overview

This lesson is conducted as a way for students to understand the Renaissance as a rebirth of a new epoch in history. Students will begin to understand how the Renaissance is a break from the Middle Ages through the comparison of plainchant versus secular chansons. The observations that arise from listening to these works will be the bridge to teaching the concepts of secular and sacred.

### Aim

How does the Renaissance differ from the Middle Ages?

### Objectives

- Introduce the idea that music acts as a mirror to society by incorporating the ideas and values of that particular time period in the work.
- Begin to understand the concepts of sacred and secular and how the Renaissance society began to combine the two concepts.
- Discern how humanism and individualism became part of the Renaissance society and manifest itself in the music.

### Historical Background

#### **Plainchant - Music of the Middle Ages**

Although not the inventor of the genre, Pope Gregory I (c. 540 - 604) did help develop the *schola cantorum*, the papal choir, and is said to have composed many Roman chants. In many churches at this time, the priest conducted the singing. Gregory felt it was important to give the choir a more major role in singing. In truth, Gregory composed very few if any of the

plainchants. It is more accurate then to call the music plainchant instead of the popular term Gregorian chant (Hoppin page 43).

These anonymous chants are melodies created from prayer services. In other words, the melody is dependent on the liturgy that is the writings in Latin that make up a particular service. These services are from the daily Mass or come from special services, festivals or feasts. The texts can be either be set syllabically (with one note per syllable) or melismatically (with a single syllable carried over to several notes).

### **Secular Chansons - Music of the Renaissance**

Guillaume Dufay (ca. 1400 - 1474) spent his most of his career working in various offices of the church including the papal chapel in Rome (1428 - 1433, 1435 - 1437). Unlike the painters of his time period, Dufay's career as a composer was supported by the Church and by patrons. Despite this, Dufay is known for a secular genre known as Chanson, which is a polyphonic setting of a French secular poem. Many music historians like to consider Dufay a transitional composer between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Hoppin page 417). In addition, many contemporaries of Dufay including Johannes Tinctoris (1435 - 1511) considered their work as part of a new movement and a break from the past. As Tinctoris pointed out in his treatise, "the possibilities of our music have been so marvelously increased that there appears to be a new art." (Strunk page 195).

## **Lesson Activities**

### **Motivation**

Begin with a discussion of music in today's society. Ask the students to come up with three pieces of music from the last 50 years which reflects our period of history. Ask them to share their responses in a whole group discussion.

### **Application**

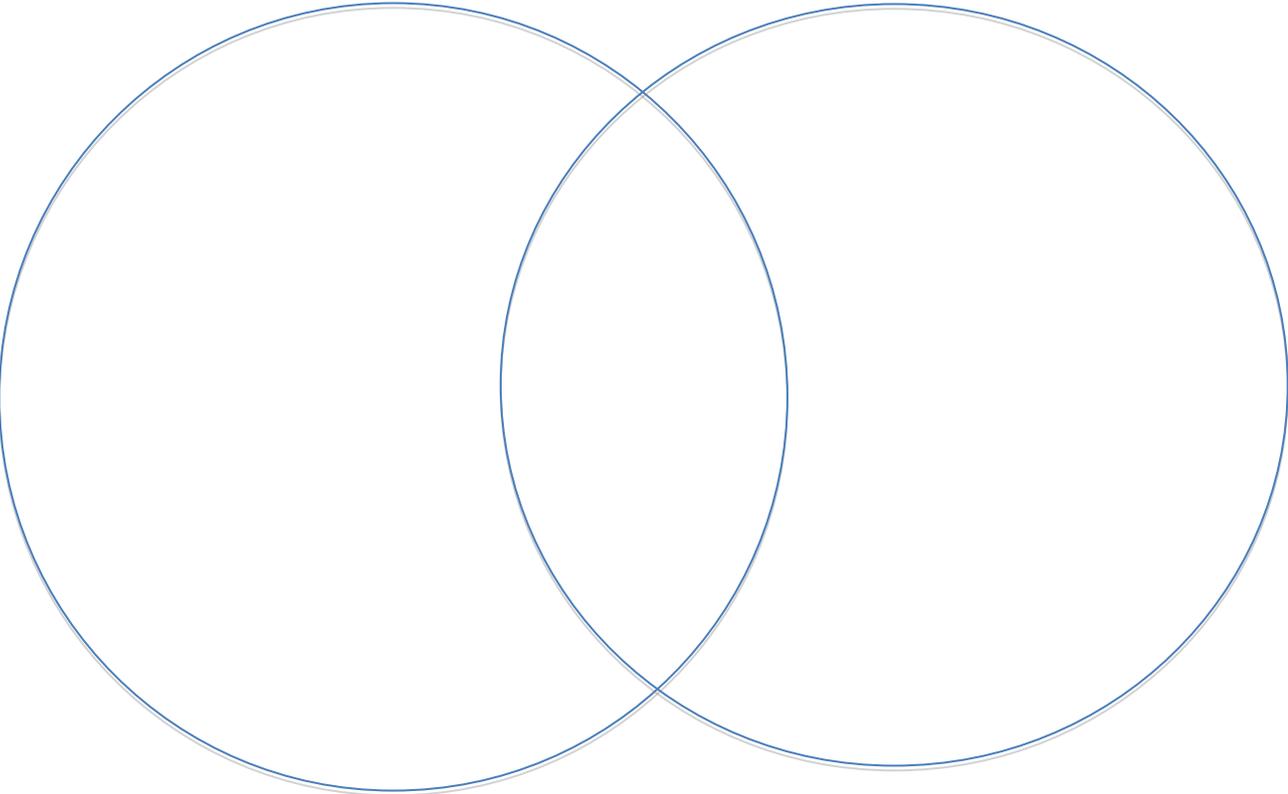
1. Have the students create Venn Diagram (Handout #1) to write their observations for each composition. For elements that are similar, have them write in the intersecting section of the two circles.
2. Play *Sabbato Sancto* a plainchant for the Easter Sunday service. Do not tell the students anything about the piece, let them label this selection, piece A and have them write down their observations.
3. Play *Puisque vous estes campieur* by Gullaume Dufay and have the student write their observations, labeling this piece B.
4. Conduct a full class discussion of the two selections that they heard. After an initial conversation about the qualities of each piece, ask them to identify what type of society each piece originates from is like.
5. After determining that piece A is older and sacred and that its function was for prayer in a church service, and that piece B is more modern and secular, show them the English translation of the Dufay chanson (handout #2) and ask for their comments.
6. Tell the students that the composer did not sign the plainchant and that Dufay signed his composition. This introduces the concept that artists during Renaissance began to take credit

for their work much more than Medieval artists and composers. A visual accompaniment to this is Raphael's "School of Athens" where the artist takes this one step further as he paints himself as a character and put Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo's faces in as Socrates and Plato respectively (Scholastic Art page 3).

### **Evaluating the Lesson**

- Informal observation of the group discussion
- Evaluation of Venn Diagram worksheets

Handout #1 - Venn Diagram for observations of piece A and piece B.





## Handout #2 - English Translation of Dufay's *Puisque vous estes campieur*

(trans. Keith Anderson)

### Puisque vous estes campieur

Since you are a fighter  
Willingly will I fight with you  
To know that if I could  
Be as good a drinker as you

And if you are a sapper  
I would also undermine you,  
(since you are a fighter  
willingly will I fight with you).

You think I am a bad drinker,  
But three cups I would easily drink,  
Truly, or I would pass  
As the worst in the world

Since you are a fighter  
Willingly will I fight with you,  
To know if I could  
Be as good a drinker as you.

The words of Dufay's composition illustrate a drastic turn to secular thought in music. Students can see how this song contrasts sharply with the Easter Service prayer of *Sabbato Sancto*.

## Lesson #2 - Santiago Compostella as the birthplace of polyphony

### Lesson Overview

This lesson which also deals with the Middle Ages can be a follow up (or preview) to Lesson One. This lesson focuses on the idea that migrations of people of different regions can bring together new ideas. This is evident in the city of Compostela, Spain whose Cathedral has the earliest recorded polyphonic compositions. Students can begin to distinguish between monophonic music and polyphonic music, and be introduced to the importance the latter has in the development of Western music.

### Aim

How does the interaction of people from different locales create new ideas?

### Objectives

- Understand the concept of cultural diffusion; the constant exchange of people, ideas and products from one location to another.
- Begin to learn the significance of the pilgrimage to city of Compostela during Medieval Europe.
- Contrast and compare the qualities of monophonic and early polyphonic music.

### Historical Background

Along with Jerusalem and Rome, Compostela - a small Galician village in Spain - was considered one of Medieval Europe's holy places. Compostela, the burial place of St. James the Greater, was visited by thousands of pilgrims all over Europe. Their journey was motivated by

physical and spiritual healing. The Cathedral of Santiago in Compostela has owned a manuscript called the Codex Calixtinus since the twelfth century. In the Codex, there are sermons, chants, stories, and a travel guide of the city of Compostela, as well as travel routes for pilgrims.

Most of the music (around ninety percent) in the Codex is plainchant for various services and feasts. Plainchants are monophonic meaning there is a single melodic line throughout. The other ten percent of the chants in the Codex are polyphonic: the combination of two or more melodies occurring at the same time. These songs in the Codex are the earliest written records of polyphonic music. Thus Compostela is regarded as one of the birthplaces of polyphonic music, one of the most important development in the history of Western Music.

## **Lesson Activities**

### **Motivation**

Begin with a discussion of how metropolitan cities are cultural centers where many new ideas are created, exchanged, and then spread throughout other parts of the country. Ask the question, why do films and fashion shows premiere in New York and Los Angeles first then to other parts of the country. Stress the concept that cities harbor cultural diffusion.

### **Application**

1. Have the students create Venn Diagram (Handout #1) to write their observations for each composition. For elements that are similar, have them write in the intersecting section of the two circles.

2. Play *Sabbato Sancto* a plainchant for the Easter Sunday service. Do not tell the students anything about the piece: let them label this selection, piece A, and have them write down their observations. If this is a follow up to Lesson One, you can have the students review their notes on this piece from last class.
3. Play *Kyrie trope: Cunctipotens Genitor* from the Miracles of Santiago and ask the students to write down their observations as piece B.
4. Have a discussion about the two pieces. What is different? What is similar? Introduce the terms monophonic and polyphonic, and stress the importance of the development of polyphony for Western music.
5. Discuss how the Compostela as a pilgrimage for countless visitors could be the birthplace for polyphony.

### **Evaluating the Lesson**

- Informal observation of the group discussion
- Evaluation of Venn Diagram worksheets

Lesson #3 - Music and the horrors of war - a case study between Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of Time" and Penderecki's "Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima"

**Lesson Overview**

When teaching World War II, this lesson can illustrate how music can capture the anguish and tragedy of war. The two selections involve two different events from the war: Messiaen's experiences as a prisoner of war at Stalag VIII A in Germany and Penderecki's homage to the victims of Hiroshima. It is important to note that while Messiaen wrote "Quartet for the End of Time" in 1940 during the war, and experienced the war first hand, Penderecki (who wrote the piece in 1960) did not share that same war torn experience.

This distinction between the two composers lives may be worth pursuing with students by asking them is there a difference between the intent of the two composers who went through different experiences. In other words, is Messiaen's composition more worthy because he lived through it? Finally this lesson serves as effective accompaniment to books such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* or John Hersey's *Hiroshima* that deal with the tragedy of the Holocaust and Hiroshima respectively.

**Aim**

How can the horrors of war be expressed through music?

## **Objectives**

- Introduce the idea that composers can use music as a narrative vehicle to tell stories.
- Understand that music can reveal the effects of war in a unique way.

## **Historical Background**

In 1940, French composer Olivier Messiaen was captured by the German army and sent to a prisoner of war camp called Stalag VIII A located in Gorlitz, about 55 miles east of Dresden. As a prisoner, Messiaen, was denied of his most basic needs but somehow managed to retain a small collection of scores including Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos*. His collection of scores seemed to be one saving grace that enabled him to endure the hunger and cold that existed as a POW (Pople page 1).

During his time at the camp, he was given music paper and pencils by the Germans which in turn enabled him to compose "Quartet for the End of Time". In addition, he met a cellist, clarinetist and violinist while in the camp. Since the instrumentation of the composition (clarinet, violin, cello and piano) is unique, this must have been based on who was available in the camp to play the piece.

Messiaen, a deeply religious man, based the quartet on the *Book of Revelations* (Pople page 1). There are seven sections to the quartet each corresponding to the first through seventh verses from Chapter Ten of the *Book of Revelations*. The seventh selection entitled *In Praise of the Immortality of Jesus*, tells the story of an angel that comes down from heaven to earth and announces that we have reached the end of time.

Krzysztof Penderecki wrote *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* in 1960 for 52 string instruments. Employing unconventional bowing techniques, including using the wood part of the bow (Grout page 751), the composer is able to re-create the haunting scenes of the Hiroshima. The piece opens with a piercing cry of high-pitched tone clusters resembling a collective scream of the bomb victims. In the third section, the strings bend pitches in an effort to create a warped vision of the atomic age. Penderecki evokes many somber and horrific moods throughout the piece that the students can remark on.

## **Lesson Activities**

### **Motivation**

Begin with a discussion on what are the different ways of dealing with tragedy. Specifically how have the victims of war handled their own personal suffering? Music and art is one way of expressing one's emotions.

### **Application**

1. Begin the lesson with drawings and poems from the book *I Never Saw Another Butterfly - Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp 1942 - 1944* (edited by Hana Volavkova). Have the students examine some of the drawings and poems and ask them for their feedback on what they read and saw. How might have art and poetry helped these children cope with the conditions at Terezin?
2. Play the first several minutes of the seventh movement of *The Quartet for the End of Time* and ask the students to write down a story or event they think is being told through the music.

3. Play the first several minutes of *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* and ask the students to write down a story or event they think is being told through the music. Ask them what specific moods are created in the music as well.
  
4. Conduct a general discussion based on the stories the students came up with. How were the pieces similar or different? After the initial discussion, provide some background material on each composition and composer.
  
5. Discuss the significance of each title. Define threnody. Do the titles enhance your understanding the piece?

### **Evaluating the Lesson**

- Informal observation of the group discussion
- Evaluation of student stories

## Lesson #4 - The Industrialization of the Soviet Union - Stalin's Five-Year Plans and Mosolov's "Zavod" (The Iron Foundry).

### Lesson Overview

Although Mosolov's "Zavod" will not teach students about Stalin's Five-Year Plans, the composition will reflect the mind set of Russia on the verge of a massive industrialization campaign. Mosolov's piece was meant to resemble the sounds of a factory in an effort to appeal to the working masses of Soviet Russia. The issue that arises is whether this composition or others like it can appeal to a segment of the population that does not normally listen to orchestral music.

### Aim

How did art and music reflect the ideas of Soviet society during Stalin's drive for industrialization?

### Objectives

- Introduce the idea that music in a totalitarian society must reflect the ideas of the state
- Discuss whether art in general can be made to appeal to the masses (essence of Soviet music in the 1920's), if so how?

### Historical Background

In 1928, Joseph Stalin conducted his first of three five-year plans, in an effort to increase productivity in the areas of agriculture and industry (Dziewanowski page 174). Since the

revolution of 1917, famine, peasant uprisings, and a four-year civil war had ravaged the Soviet Union. The communist utopia of a worker's paradise was in serious jeopardy of failing and the new leader adopted these five year plans by setting quotas and goals that each farm and factory had to adhere to in order for the Soviet Union to catch up with the capitalist, industrialized West.

"As the soviet cultural revolution unfolded, it increasingly stressed the integrating values of Russian nationalism mixed with Communist ideology in order to produce a new species, the Soviet Man" (Dziewanowski page 205). In a totalitarian regime, art had to reflect the ideas of the communist state by appealing to the workers. The "Soviet Man" was going to be molded through the arts where the ideas of Communism would be forthright. The Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM) an organization formed in the 1920's, sought out to destroy anything that resembled "bourgeois" culture by replacing it with music for the masses or proletariat music.

Aleksandr V. Mosolov wrote "Zavod" in 1927 at the twilight of Stalin's massive drive for industrialization. "Zavod" or the "Iron Foundry" reflects the ideals of Soviet Art by simulating sounds of a factory. The piece opens with a swirling mood that resembles an assembly line. The repetitive motifs by the violins and middle brass enhance the monotony of the assemble line. There is no real melody to the piece. Instead there is a slow build up of repeated motifs coupled with loud percussive strikes.

## **Lesson Activities**

### **Motivation**

Begin with a discussion on who are the types of audiences for different genres of music? For example who goes to rock concerts, jazz clubs and classical concerts. Focus on the latter. Is it possible for classical music to appeal to the working class? Why or why not? This last questions deserves some attention because it what groups like the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians aim to do.

### **Application**

1. Begin with a reading of the following primary source document: *Literature of the Soviet*

*Idea: "The Craftsman of Culture" - Maxim Gorky*

Gorky discusses the essence of Soviet Realism, an artistic movement launched in 1935 to capture the imagination of the working class. For example, in literature, according to Gorky, the hero or main antagonist should be centered around labor and the organization of work (Rogers page 348).

2. Play Mosolov's "Zavod" and ask the students to discuss how this might be connected to Gorky's manifesto of Soviet Realism. What specifically about the piece resembles a factory?
3. Show paintings of the Soviet Constructivist School where the worker is featured, and ask the students to relate them to Gorky's manifesto and Mosolov's piece.

4. Conclude the lesson with a discussion of whether or not this piece works in attracting the masses. Can art or music set out to do what Soviet Realism wants to? Is a piece like "Zavod" going to successfully carry out its aim of destroying bourgeois culture and appeal to the working masses?

### **Evaluating the Lesson**

- Informal observation of the group discussion

## Lesson #5 - "Strange Fruit" and the politics of race relations.

### Lesson Overview

This lesson can serve as a compliment when studying the topics of the Civil War and Reconstruction in United States History. For older students, teacher may want to incorporate the horrific imagery of lynching that is captured in the photographic essay "*Without Sanctuary*". As a comparative event, one could tie the song with the events of the Reign of Terror (the second, violent stage of the French Revolution, where beheading by guillotine was a popular form of entertainment) in the way that lynching was in the American South during Reconstruction.

### Aim

Why is the performance of "Strange Fruit" in the 1930's considered by some of the birth of the modern civil rights movement (Margolick *Strange Fruit*)?

### Objectives

- Introduce the idea that music can be effective tool for social protest.
- Discuss how the pain of racism can be expressed through song?
- Make comparisons and differences between the "festive" atmosphere of lynchings in the American South and beheadings during the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution.

### Historical Background

Between 1889 and 1940, conservative figures state that 3,833 people were lynched, ninety percent of which occurred in the South. In many instances, the local authorities were acquiescent and often times compliant. The murders took place in open spaces with a festive like atmosphere (Margolick page 19). (See *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in*

*America* for photographic evidence of people laughing and socializing in front of the hung bodies). Many of the photographs in the book were initially made into souvenir postcards to be sold at lynchings. A similar comparison to this festive atmosphere created can be made when examining the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution. Public execution by guillotine was a popular form of entertainment with schoolboys singing and vendors selling locks of hair of the executed victims (Schama page 66).

Schoolteacher and communist sympathizer Abel Meeropol wrote "Strange Fruit" in 1939. It most notably performed by Billie Holiday initially at the Café Society, where many left leaning artists and writers patronized (Margolick page 25). The song has a haunting feel to it as the lyrics create the metaphor of dead black bodies hanging from the trees to be strange fruit that smell of burning flesh. Many music critics consider the song to be the first of its kind to openly address the plight of racism in America (Margolick page 39).

## **Lesson Activities**

### **Motivation**

Begin with a discussion of how songs can act as a vehicle for social protest. Provide examples such Bob Dylan, or Pete Seeger. Discuss whether protest songs can be effective or not.

### **Application**

1. Play the Billie Holiday rendition of "Strange Fruit" and ask the students to listen to the lyrics and find out what the song is about.

2. After initial discussion, play the song again and show them the lyrics. Ask them to write down observations what stands out about the song hearing a second time. Have the students explain the mood(s) that the song creates and how this mood is created. Teachers may want to stress the unique phrasing and vocal quality of Billie Holiday.
3. Have the students lead a discussion based on their notes and evaluate whether or not this song is an effective vehicle for social protest. How might have audiences in different parts of the country and the world might have reacted to this song hearing it in the 1940's?
4. If you have older students have them examine the horrific photographs (with parental permission) of *Without Sanctuary* and ask them if the song captures the brutality of lynching.

### **Evaluating the Lesson**

- Informal observation of the group discussion
- Evaluation of student stories

## Part Three - Reflection

These lessons are meant to serve as small pieces to a much larger pedagogical puzzle. Both the lessons and the music should promote a dialogue and debate within the classrooms of course, some compositions and their corresponding lessons work better at doing this than others.

The most success that I have had as a teacher using these lessons has occurred while using Lesson One in comparing the music of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance. I usually conduct this lesson on one of the first days of the school year for my sophomores because the curriculum represents where the students should be at that given moment. The Global History curriculum for the New York State Board of Regents is two-year course conducted over ninth and tenth grade. The students enter ninth grade having some prior knowledge of the Middle Ages but not necessarily the Renaissance. I use lesson number one as review of the ninth grade and a launching point for a two-week study of the Renaissance.

At the New York City Museum School, students hone a skill called “object observation” while observing various objects in museums or in classrooms. Students write on the left side of the page objective observations, on the right side any subjective observations, and on the bottom of the page any questions they have about the object they observing (see Handout #3).

In addition to or as a compliment to this, I have students use the object observation skill while listening to both the plainchant and the Dufay chanson in lesson one. I have them label each title Piece A and Piece B and have them fill out a separate worksheet for each one.

Handout #3

# Object Observation Worksheet

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Objective Observations

Subjective Observations

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Questions:

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In examining student notes from the lesson, one can see that some obvious comments were made. Under objective comments for the plainchant, students wrote there are no

instruments, all male voices singing the same note and word, and they are all singing a "stretched out" version of the word Alleluia hence the piece is sung in Latin. For subjective observations, students wrote that it sounded as if they were singing in a church based on the echo quality of their singing. Some suggested that there was a deep and dark feeling to the music. From these few comments, I can illustrate some of the concepts behind monophonic plainchant. This stretched out "feeling out" feeling to the words that the students describe is the setting of prayer to music. Medieval music in the plainchant genre served a sacred function that reinforces the role that the Church played in medieval society. However, it is important to stress to the students that there did exist a large amount of secular music during the Middle Ages and if there was time after this lesson, I could play them Troubadour music as an example.

In discussing and observing the Dufay chanson, students often first note that there is a lone female voice singing behind the accompaniment of instruments. The subjective comments are that the mood is that of a party, some say that the movie "Titanic" comes to mind. Although never having seen it, I am assuming that there is a scene of party on the ship that quasi resembles the music of this Dufay piece. Nevertheless, the mood that this chanson generates is strikingly different from the plainchant. Music serves a secular role, students have commented that they can visualize a party during the Renaissance hosted by Medici, the wealthy banking family, who became major patrons of the arts. I stress to the students that the Renaissance was not exclusively secular as the song suggests. Rather, that the Renaissance was the first time in Europe that people were beginning to combine the sacred with the secular. For example, in Renaissance art, one can see, everyday secular objects such as hand crafted jewelry, in a Biblical scene like the Annunciation.

This lesson of using music to highlight the differences between Medieval and Renaissance is meant to stimulate dialogue and provoke debate. One can run the risk of oversimplification of just playing music and saying all the ideas and values of a complex society and epoch and inherent in this one composition. One way to drive this point home to my students when I use music in this manner is to play a Britney Spears' song and say that this pop star represents all teenagers. There is a collective outrage in my class at this statement as teenagers vary in taste and outlook, but the point of gross generalization comes across. I believe that to use music as a primary source in the social studies classroom, the teacher must have some working knowledge of the music and its historical context to prevent the oversimplification. It is important to convey this to the students by providing other examples. For instance, when listening to Dufay, one can play an excerpt from one of his masses and mention that he worked in cathedrals.

In my opinion, learning happens when students are engaged in the subject matter. Music can be one vehicle that can stimulate learning. In addition, by adhering to the concept of Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, music is one aspect of teaching across the intelligences. By combining art and literature as a compliment to the music, there is a sincere attempt to provide a well-rounded approach to education that textbook and straight lectures cannot offer. Finally, music does have value as a primary source for historical inquiry. Taught sensitively, a music composition, can have as much pedagogical value as a written primary source document such a speech or diary entry. This thesis is my first (and hopefully not my last) attempt to use music as a valuable classroom resource in teaching history.

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